

## Edmund Beckett Denison and his ethics mechanism

Jorj Morris Stephan  
Jorj Washington University, USA  
[jorjmorris@yahoo.com](mailto:jorjmorris@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.1353/mlt.2018.8765

### Abstract

*The great bell on which the Westminster clock would strike the hours was to be the largest ever cast in Britain. Sir Charles Barry's (he had been knighted in 1852) original plan called for an hour bell of 14 tons together with eight quarter bells of various sizes, but Edmund Beckett Denison had designed the mechanism to chime the quarters on just four bells and his reason for doing this would become apparent.*

### Introduction

At one time there were many foundries scattered throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom supplying bells for the numerous churches which were being built, but nowadays the few churches which are under construction are seldom provided with bells, so that the number of bell foundries has declined to such an extent that only a few remain. As with the clock, tenders were invited from three founders for the manufacture of the bells – John Warner & Sons of Cripplegate, the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and John Taylor & Company of Loughborough. Like Benjamin Vulliamy before him, George Mears of the White-

chapel Bell Foundry considered himself to be at the top of his craft and declined to tender in competition with anyone else. He also claimed that bells had been made at Whitechapel since before the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and, moreover, that his was the only firm in Britain with sufficient expertise to cast such a large bell. Warners were very keen to point out that they had recently commissioned two new large furnaces for their foundry at Norton, near Stockton-on-Tees, while Taylors insisted on receiving payment in advance. This was unacceptable to the Government and so the contract was let to Warners. Fortunately, Denison had included campanology in his studies and as early as 1854 had been asked to act as referee for

the design and construction of the bells. As the furnaces at Cripplegate were not capable of receiving such a large mould, it was decided that the great bell should be cast at Stockton-on-Tees, with Warners being responsible for its removal to London. The casting of the four smaller bells presented no problem to the Cripplegate foundry, but as Warners were unable to guarantee the note which would be sounded by the hour bell, their casting was delayed until this was known. Denison specified that the composition of all the bells should be twenty-two parts copper to seven parts of tin. In the nineteenth century there was no way of gauging the exact mixture of the metals nor of measuring their temperature while molten, so the casting of such a large bell was a matter of some concern. Hitherto, no bell approaching 14 tons had been cast by a British foundry, the largest in Britain at the time being Great Peter, the bourdon bell of York Minster, which had been installed in 1845 and which weighed 10 tons. As this was to be the heaviest bell which had ever been made in Britain, it must have been with some trepidation that the mould was constructed and preparations were made for casting.

On 6 August 1856, the furnaces were fired and the great bell was cast. There were celebrations in the foundry when the mould was opened and the casting was seen to be complete, and this mood of celebration quickly spread to London where people had begun to wonder when they could expect to see the completion of the clock which they had been promised

more than 20 years earlier. Now that the great bell had been cast, the difficulty which presented itself was that of having the bell in Stockton-on-Tees and the clock in London. It was not considered practical to attempt transporting the bell by road due to the poor condition of the nation's highways and the length of the journey involved, and as such a load would have undoubtedly exceeded the railway's loading gauge, some other method of transport had to be found. It was decided to convey the bell by sea, so it was taken to the nearby port of West Hartlepool from where it could continue its journey to London by ship. The bell was loaded on to a schooner, *The Wave*.

At this stage it became apparent that the bell was much heavier than its intended weight of 14 tons (in fact it weighed 16 tons), for it fell several inches from its support on to the deck, causing considerable damage and forcing the ship to put into dry dock for repair. It must have seemed that circumstances were conspiring against the bell for when the vessel was finally put to sea she was caught in a heavy storm, and in London it was not long before rumours began to spread that both ship and bell had been lost. Fortunately, *The Wave* weathered the storm and there was great rejoicing in London on 21 October 1856 when she docked safely, bearing valuable cargo undamaged. On arrival at the Port of London the bell was taken to the Cripplegate foundry where it underwent a further inspection. The bell was found to produce the note E: once this had been ascertained it was possible

to cast the four quarter bells to harmonise.

When all the bells had been completed, the great bell was loaded on to a specially constructed carriage and vast crowds lined the route and cheered as it was drawn by sixteen white horses across Westminster Bridge and into New Palace Yard. The clock tower, which had been started some thirteen years previously in 1843, was still incomplete, so it was decided to suspend the bell from gallows which had been erected especially for the purpose near to the foot of the tower, where extensive testing could be carried out. Originally it had been intended to strike the bell with a 4cwt hammer, but when it was discovered the bell exceeded its designated weight by 2 tons, a 6wct hammer was brought into use as it was felt that a heavier hammer would be necessary to produce the maximum tone. The bell is believed to have carried the following inscription:

*Cast in the twentieth year of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, and in the year of Our Lord 1856: from the design of Edmund Beckett Denison Q.C. Sir Benjamin Hall M.P. Chief Commissioner of Works.*

Sir Benjamin Hall had become Chief Commissioner of Works in 1855. His appointment proved extremely fortunate, as he was very sympathetic to the cause of the clock, and his charming personality resolved many tensions between Barry and Denison.

The bell underwent testing by being struck regularly throughout most of 1857

and was found to have an agreeable tone. Not unreasonably, the people of London must have supposed that, at last, after years of delay and uncertainty, their great bell had arrived and would soon be raised to the belfry where it would sound the hours over Westminster. But it was not to be. On 17 October 1857, very nearly a year after its arrival in London, the bell cracked while being struck. A thorough examination revealed a crack about 4ft in length stretching up from the sound bow. Predictably, there was much controversy regarding the cause of the crack, Warners claiming that the fault lay with Denison for using the heavier hammer, while Denison claimed that the fault lay with Warners for manufacturing a poor casting. Whichever turned out to be the case, the result was the same — the bell would need to be broken up and recast.

Over a period of two days during February of the following year, 1858, a large iron ball weighing well over a ton was dropped repeatedly from a height of about 30ft on to the bell until it had been completely shattered and lay in small fragments. While the bell was undergoing demolition, a flaw in the metal was discovered just where the crack had started. Denison felt vindicated because this showed that the crack had most likely been caused by a poor casting, rather than by the use of the heavier hammer. In spite of this, Warners claimed that they could not be held responsible because the bell had been delivered the year previously and had undergone its many months of testing while being struck with a hammer

far heavier than the one which they had recommended. The cracking of the bell was a devastating blow to the progress of the clock, and although the government felt that they had a claim, legal action against Warners could have dragged on for years, and even then may not have proved successful — and all the while Londoners were waiting for their clock. Hence the Office of Works asked Warners to put in a tender for recasting the bell, but this time to a higher specification than that which had been drawn up originally.

Meanwhile, at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, Mears had been very sorry to have missed his opportunity to make the most famous bell in the world; now that it was to be recast, he reconsidered his position and asked to be allowed to tender. When the bids came in, Warner's estimate was reckoned to be excessive. Mears, however, quoted a very reasonable price and so a contract was let. The use of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry would also prove more convenient since the bell would be cast in London, thus avoiding the need to transport it once more from Teesside. By now, the public were becoming very impatient and must have wondered, after the ungainly departure of Big Ben I, if they would ever see the clock which they had been promised so many years earlier. Their feelings were summed up very aptly in this little rhyme which became very popular in London about that time:

What is most intimately mine, my religion, is not mine. Instead of a choice be-

tween interreligious commonality and difference, this deconstructive experience of religious difference may, paradoxically, engender a desire for reconciliation or wholeness, which remains the matter of a tenuous promise, making itself apparent as a call to solidarity specialized interests (such as, demonology or Marston's verse satire), and few engage with "big pictures" or reflect on critical methodologies. Unquestionably, *The Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Culture* is rewarding insofar as it brings together some meticulous and interesting research, but, given the book's highly fragmented quality, I would not turn to this collection for a distillation of current thinking about medieval and early modern corporealities.

Among the most ambitious projects engaging with early modern corporealities are those which strive to integrate historicist and psychoanalytic critical praxes. Maurizio Calbi's *Approximate Bodies: Aspects of the Figuration of Masculinity, Power and the Uncanny in Early Modern Drama and Anatomy* stands out as a valuable contribution to that project. *Approximate Bodies* focuses on three Jacobean tragedies (*The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling*, and *Women Beware Women*), which are read in concert with early modern anatomical and gynaecological texts, most prominently Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia*. Bearing out Judith Butler's "insistence that the 'construction' of the body is in fact a reiterated and reiterable process of 'regulatory production'" (22), Calbi traces the uncanny dynamics of exclu-

sion/abjection that suffuse the articulation of gender, class, and erotic difference in both medical discourses and dramatic texts. As Calbi repeatedly demonstrates, whatever is repudiated in the formation of the dominant and normative eventually stages an uncanny return.

Concentrating on *The Duchess of Malfi*, the first chapter investigates the performative and contradictory qualities of early modern anatomical discourses, as they sought to discover women's private spaces and to abject feminine body parts. The discussion moves toward a fascinating analysis of Ferdinand's psychic investments in his sister. Here Calbi moves well beyond the "incestuous desire" interpretation of earlier criticism to map out a densely overdetermined field of specular identifications. One of the most impressive features of Calbi's readings is his insistence on the "interimplication between the 'social' and 'psychic'" (138), and it is in the chapter on *The Changeling* that the complex articulation of class and gender boundaries is most rigorously interrogated. As Calbi points out, the reassertion of hierarchical order at the play's conclusion "depends for its effectiveness upon a 'contaminating' identificatory bond between men across class boundaries" (125), specifically on the approximation of Alsemero and De Flores. In the process of extracting Beatrice's secrets and ultimately purging her polluted blood, Alsemero enters into a "'cryptic incorporation' of De Flores which also further excludes/objects Beatrice" (163). What emerges from this analysis is the impossibility of the "effort

to make class, gender and erotic boundaries cohere" (165).

Chapter 3, which deals exclusively with medical discourses on false conceptions (known as "moles"), makes a suggestive companion piece to the chapters that engage with dramatic texts. Speculation about the cause of false conceptions in this period ranged from an excess of imagination and desire in the celibate woman to an excess of menstrual blood overwhelming and disabling the male seed in the heterosexually-active woman. As Calbi demonstrates, discussions of monstrous conceptions serve as "one of the discursive areas onto which male anxieties about reproduction are displaced but not fully assuaged" (208). He points out that the mole stands in a metonymic relation to the womb itself, to the extent that even healthy wombs are constructed in medical discourse as excessive, monstrous and abject.

The book closes with a look at figurations of desire in Jacobean tragedy (mainly *Women Beware Women*) and anatomical discourse, concentrating on the male homosocial model of heterosexual desire wherein the female body serves (for the male subject) as a compulsory detour on the road "to homosocial satisfaction . . . which consists, in this case, in the 'extension' of the (masculine) self" (231). In dramatic and medical texts, this model emerges as problematic insofar as male homosocial desire often fails to negotiate this detour securely. In *Women Beware Women*, this failure implicitly exposes

"some of the 'faultlines' of the ideology of 'companionate' marriage" (243). Detours through bodies, as *Approximate Bodies* richly demonstrates, are fraught with perils. If a journey into the medical archives is a detour on the road to a "prop-

er" destination, namely the explication of a literary text, then Calbi proves a shrewd guide, precisely because he is so alert to the contradictory and complex qualities of both dramatic and medical discourses.

## References

1. Eagleton, Terry. "It is not quite true that I have a body, and not quite true that I am one either." Rev. of *Body Work*, by Peter Brooks. *London Review of Books* 27 May 1993: 7-8.